

C O P Y

9 October 1999

Mr Alan M. Levitt  
67-35A 186th Lane  
Fresh Meadows, NY 11365

Dear Mr Levitt,

Nicholas Holmes of the National Museums of Scotland has sent a copy of your letter concerning the possible circulation, or at least accounting use, of shillings (and pence?) in mid-19c New England.

My numismatic work has been exclusively with British coinage in Great Britain and not colonial, although I am of course generally familiar with western hemisphere coinage. You probably are aware that foreign coins were legal tender in the U.S. until 1857 -- and even after that date in pockets in the south and west.

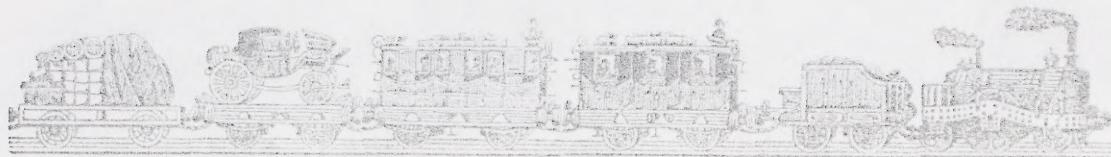
However, the only foreign coins one hears much about are Spanish 8-reales dollars and their fractions. Although the fineness might differ a bit, our dollars were based on them and they circulated at par. You must be familiar with the expressions 'two bits' and 'four bits', still occasionally heard.

I discussed the shilling possibility with Prof. Gaspar and he will take the matter up with Eric Newman who probably knows more about monetary circulation in the U.S. than anyone else. I am sending them your letter and you should hear from one or the other in due course.

Good luck!

*Harry E. Manville.*

cc: Dr Gaspar ✓  
Mr Holmes



## Alan M. Levitt

Mr. Nicholas Holmes  
Curator of Coins  
National Museums of Scotland  
Chambers Street  
Edinburgh EH1 1JF  
Scotland

Dear Mr. Holmes,

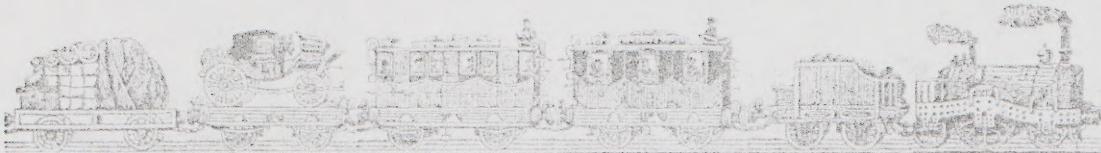
I had, last month, the pleasure of visiting the Museums whilst in Edinburgh attending an International Summer Course at the University of Edinburgh. I purchased a copy of your *Scottish Coins - A History of Small Change In Scotland* which – although I am no longer a "practising numismatist" – I found extremely interesting and exceptionally informative.

Some of your observations and judgements appear related to aspects of the research that I have undertaken concerning the early operations of the Boston & Providence Rail Road [*sic*]. Perhaps there are some links between the research you have done and answers that I am seeking.

Work on the rail road began in 1831-32, and the major engineering achievement, the Canton Viaduct, was completed in 1835. The employment of Scots as stone cutters and stone masons, and Irish as laborers for the construction of the Canton Viaduct, is well-documented, and it would appear that these workers came to Canton for that specific work. It is recorded that the Irishmen built their shacks at Dunbar's Ledge, while the Scots ate their porridge and drank their barley beer at Dunbar's quarry. Harmony between the groups did not always prevail. I think it reasonable to presume that there were significant numbers of other Scotch and Irish immigrants at work on that, and other, railways, and in other enterprises, before and after the construction of the Canton Viaduct.

I have, in my collection, the complete set of Pay Rolls of, and Invoices paid by, the Boston & Providence during the month of September 1846. (It seems that these documents were a part of the company's archives that were sold at public auction in 1944.) Therein are puzzlements that you might be able to shed a bit of light upon!

On the Pay Rolls, the *per diem* pay of 44 (out of 141) workers is *calculated* in shillings and pence. Of these, 43 individuals occupied various categories of Laborer; the other, Isaiah Hoyt, was the Superintendent of the 4th Division. The actual monies paid to these people were in U.S. dollars and cents. In the "conversion" calculations, one shilling was equated to 16-2/3 cents. None of the individuals whose *per diem* rates were shilling-and-pence-based have names that might be characterised as "Scotch" or "Irish".



Several of the other *per diem* rates that listed on the Pay Rolls are stated in dollars and cents, but equate to amounts that are undoubtedly derived from sterling currency: \$1.66-2/3 [10s. 0d.]; \$1.62-1/2 [9s. 9d.]; \$1.37-1/2 [8s. 3d.]; and \$1.12-1/2 [6s. 9d.]. The half-cent amounts *might* be based on the U.S. half-cent which was minted until 1857, albeit not in significant quantities, while the \$1.66-2/3-cent rate would clearly appear to be derived from the ascribed value of a shilling.

Amongst the invoices to the B&P, there are four that include charges for labour [*sic*] that is calculated in shillings and pence. Two invoices include materials (cord wood and soft iron *inter alia*) that are billed in shillings and pence. There is one invoice that includes a charge for the use of a horse cart that is based on shillings and pence. On all seven of these shillings-and-pence-invoices, the other items are expressed in dollars and cents, as are the invoice totals. Here too, the shilling equates to 16-2/3 cents.

I have yet to uncover more than a few other significant references to shillings and pence in use at that time! The journals and diaries of Isaac Stearns, Jr. (vols. 2 and 3, 1830-1860) – a prominent businessman in the Boston & Providence's "patch" – lists all his transactions in dollars and cents, with no mention of shillings or pence. Neither the Index to Henry David Thoreau's two-million-word journal (1837-1861) nor *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau* (1836-1862) appear to have any references to shillings or pence. Asa Sheldon, in his autobiographical *Yankee Drover, Being the Unpretending Life of Asa Sheldon, Farmer, Trader, and Working Man, 1788-1870*, wrote of shillings and pence in his boyhood shortly after the Revolution. Although Sheldon worked as a railroad contractor during construction of the Boston & Lowell and afterwards, all his many transactions are listed in dollars and cents.

Hank Wieand Bowman wrote in *Pioneer Railroads* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1954) that in the spring of 1834 the fare on the Boston & Worcester Rail Road "... from Washington Street, Boston [to] Newton [the o]ne-way fare was 37-1/2 cents, which was the going price of the shilling" [my emphasis]. Unfortunately, Bowman did not cite his source. However, that journey represented seven miles, or a fare of about five cents per mile. The phrase, "the going price of the shilling" might suggest that shillings were circulating as "acceptable" currency.

In 1842, Isaac Sterns, Jr. recorded that he paid 37-1/2 cents for a journey from Norton to Boston, a distance of 28 miles (about one cent per mile). Later that year, he noted paying 62-1/2 cents for the 17 mile trip between Mansfield and Myrick's (about four cents per mile). The four-cents-per-mile fare, higher than the average fare Sterns reports paying may include a ticket purchased for a travelling companion. The Boston & Providence had both first- and second-class fares at the time. In that Stearns did not record this class of travel, it might be taken that his range of fares reflects the fact that some journeys were first-class; others, second-class.

John J. McCusker (*How Much Is That In Real Money? A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States*. Worcester,



monthly may have been a result of that situation. Vendors were paid quarterly, and usually by check, but they would have needed "small change" to pay *their* employees, such as the horse and cart provider.

If it is assumed that shillings did circulate here in the post-Revolutionary War period, as well as following the War of 1812, then one must wonder when they were minted. Were they "relatively old" or were they "contemporary"? It would seem to have been "politically -- or patriotically -- incorrect" for the Boston & Providence pay workers and vendors on a shillings basis if such was not a common practice at the time, especially considering that Paul Revere's copper works became a major B&P customer, and that his son, Joseph Warren Revere, was a member of the Boston & Providence's board of directors.

Perhaps shillings did circulate, both in response to the need for small change and because Scotch, Irish, and English immigrants not only thought in terms of, but also could best "visualise" or "relate to" the value and significance of a shilling more meaningfully than that of a dollar. After all, were not the penalties on trespass and other warning notices of the railways in Britain expressed as "Forty Shillings" – rather than as £2 – until rather recently?

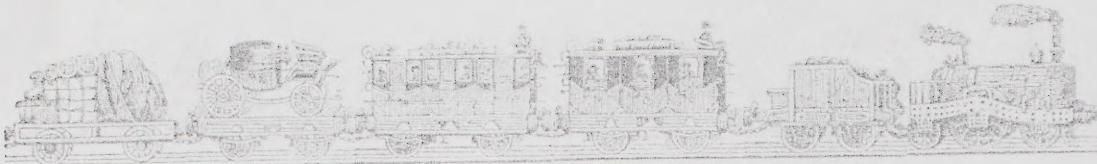
Perhaps, too, there is more here than meets the eye: my bank's foreign exchange department charges more for notes issued by banks in Scotland than it does for Bank of England notes. And – with rare exception – forms used by banks for reportage of coinage list pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, half-dollars, dollars, and *other*. Perhaps shillings still appear!

I would greatly appreciate any insight or thoughts that you might have related to the reckoning in, or usage of, shillings and pence by the Boston & Providence Rail Road, and its contemporaries.

With thanks and appreciation,

Yours sincerely,

September 28, 1999



Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1992) calculated a 5% *deflation* between 1834 and 1842, so one might wonder about Stearns' records. (I appreciate that railway fares did not change as quickly as the prices of consumer goods, and that fares might not then have been related to the prices of consumer goods!)

The fractional-cent fares recorded by Sterns seem unusual. In 1851 (the earliest comprehendum I know of – *American Railway Guide and Pocket Companion ... 1851*. New York: Curran Dinsmore & Co.), the 80 railways in New England published 748 fares. None of these appear in fractions of a cent, although it is possible that such was the case because of typographic considerations rather than the tariffs themselves! Yet Sterns' payments of 37-1/2 cents and 62-1/2 cents (that equate to 2s. 3d. and 3s. 9d., respectively) tempts one to draw some conclusions (as do other of his recorded "whole-cents" fares that are multiples of 16-2/3 cents)!

It appears that many of the 1851 fares were based on (what we today would call) "market pricing" rather than on an adhered-to cents-per-mile basis, but to relate these to shillings-and-pence equivalents might be a bit risky.

I have corresponded with Professor McCusker (who is Halsell Distinguished professor of history and professor of economics at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas), seeking his thoughts. He was quite surprised to learn of such a wide-spread use of shillings and pence, especially by a large enterprise such as the Boston & Providence.

Another interesting reference to the "currency" of shillings is in the writings of a Virginia bookseller, the Rev. Mason Lock Weems ("... a figure of near-legendary proportions in the South during the early years of the nineteenth century"). Like Lackington, the great bookseller of London, Weems believed that small books made large profits. As to Virginia, he wrote [c. 1790 – c. 1825; I have not ascertained the exact year], "People here think nothing of giving 1/6 (their quarter of a dollar) for anything that pleases their fancy". Rev. Weems also wrote of a school master in Fredericksburg: "[He] w<sup>d</sup> not touch Murray's Grammar at 87½ cents [5s. 3d.?], because he said Johnson at Richmond furnish<sup>d</sup> them at 75 [4s. 6d.?]".

Thus, Weems sees – at some time prior to 1825 – the shilling having the same value as that ascribed to it in 1846 by the Boston & Providence. McCusker calculated a 23% deflation in consumer prices between 1825 and 1846.

It appears that the shilling was more than a "money of account" in an era when such would not be expected. I see strong inference that the shilling may have circulated in mixture with United States coinage.

I do not think it unreasonable to assume that there was a shortage of small change in the U.S. during the entire first half of the nineteenth century. There certainly was one during the Civil War period. (And we face a severe shortage of one cent pieces today!) That the Boston & Providence workers (and I presume others) were paid